

Hardy and Women (6)

Grace's Acquisition of Volition

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1 Introduction

As the title of the novel, *The Woodlanders*, suggests, several characters are described in the story and each character suffers from his or her own peculiar problem while each person lives in the villages of Woodland. Among them are three female persons: Grace Melbury, Marty South and Mrs Charmond. Their personal histories have their own stage of development and their forms of existence that lead to suffering. Grace Melbury in particular is the person who plays a major part in close contact with George Melbury, Giles Winterborne, and Dr Fitzpiers; Grace grows up to be an independent woman who determines her own way of life at the end of her long sufferings. Her final aim is to choose a suitable spouse and on the way to her goal she makes observation of, defers to, or sets herself against three male persons: her father, Giles and Dr Fitzpiers. It is true that Grace seems to be distracted in her circumstantial judgment, her view of things, and her deeds because she always sways between sympathy and contempt for Giles, and between admiration and hatred toward Dr Fitzpiers. But these characteristics of hers show the process of her acquisition of volition through accumulation of various experiences in her daily life. The process toward the acquisition of her power to decide is her circular evolvment in connection with these three male persons.

Giles Winterborne is a representative of English rural districts of

Woodland. He is a person who works by the sweat of his brow, who is deep-tanned, earnest, masculine and unsophisticated, and who lives in extreme poverty. Because he embodies the sublimity of the country, Grace, born and raised in the same country, has fellow feeling for and is attracted to Giles Winterborne. On the other hand Dr Fitzpiers is a novel, sophisticated, and urbanized person who has expert knowledge of the medical art. He is quite different from the rest of the village people with respect to his generous wealth and graceful diversions. Therefore he is the object of Grace's admiration because Grace is city-educated, is interested in newness, and has recently become urbane. Grace is at the mercy of her father's dream and expectations, and associates herself with Giles and Dr Fitzpiers. She vacillates between them under her father's advice and support, but after Giles Winterborne's death she gets away from nostalgia for her native village, Little Hintock, and from her emotional attachment to the rural areas of Woodland, and at long last she chooses the result arising from her rational decision.

The aim of the present paper is to survey the process of Grace's circular involvement in connection with three male persons and to examine how Grace acquires the power to choose Dr Fitzpiers for her reliable husband. This survey shows that Thomas Hardy describes Grace Melbury as one of the new women he advocates.

2 In connection with Giles Winterborne

2.1 Cultivation

Grace's first step toward independence from her parents starts when she is sent to a city to be educated, but what and how she learns there are not described in the story. As is usual,¹ these things are done outside the story. Just a few names of the towns she visited are mentioned in the early part of the story. This means that Hardy's aim is not to picture the effort

Grace makes to learn and study at a modern school, but to describe how she becomes a sophisticated woman and can judge for herself. Therefore the changes in Grace's view of things and of objects she is interested in are told as soon as she returns to Little Hintock. Grace's characteristics are that she was born and raised in the country, that she learns and studies at schools in a city, and that she returns to her native village. In this respect she is different from Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native* (1878), who was born in a city and was raised and educated there, but is obliged to live in the country. She is an outsider to the village. Clym Yeobright, her chosen husband, does not intend to go back to Paris, but to live and start a boarding school in the native village. In due course she is crushed by her desire to go back to the city or to be loved thoroughly.² Unlike Eustacia Vye, Grace is to choose an urbanized person, Dr Fitzpiers, and to go out to a town with him in hopes of a happy life thereafter.

How Grace has changed after being educated in a city is expressed by her father, a timber-merchant, who notices the progress and improvement in Grace's manner and her figure. He finds "the womanly mien and manners of his daughter" (6-76).³ Then, Giles Winterborne sees that

a single trait in Grace Melbury ... was a new woman in many ways : a creature of more ideas, more dignity, and above all, more assurance, than the original Grace had been capable of. (38-294)

Besides, Mrs Charmond regards Grace as an intellectual companion of cultivation. Mrs Charmond says to Grace, "You are so accomplished, I hear; I should be quite honoured by such intellectual company" (8-90).

In the story Grace's changes are described in several places. The first example is that Grace's interest in her native village languishes. When she arrives at her native village, her eyes are blurred because her mind is filled with experiences in several English towns and a few foreign places, and is spell-bound by an urbane atmosphere. Therefore she is not interested in

the minute phases of the village, and is even in reaction against her fiancé, Giles, who points out and explains some alterations along the village streets. Grace describes places and persons she visited and met during the year, but avoids everything about her inner state of mind.

It was true; cultivation had so far advanced in the soil of Miss Melbury's mind as to lead her to talk of anything save of that she knew well, and had the greatest interest in developing: herself. She had fallen from the good old Hintock ways. (6–74)

The second example is that she is dressed up in urbane clothes when she meets Mrs Charmond at Hintock House. She is “bonneted, cloaked, and gloved, . . .” (7–86). Grace thinks that Mrs Charmond's proposal is excellent because she is asked to record Mrs Charmond's impressions of travel like that of a few famous writers. The third example is that Grace has been “accustomed to tread with a bevy of sylph-like creatures in muslin in the music-room of a large house, . . .” (10–104).

2.2 Disdain

As Grace is thus changed, she finds out that the party Giles holds for her and her parents at Christmas does not suit her taste any longer. Giles' way of holding a party is lax and careless. For example, the party is not prepared in time, and a splash of stew hits Grace's face. After supper there is a dance, but Grace does not join in the movement because she has forgotten the old dance. A female card-player tells Grace's fortune unskillfully for want of practice. As a result Grace regards the standards in Hintock as being low in comparison with the high standards in a city. There is another case in which Grace cannot endure this low standard in Hintock. She is seated in the old dining-room of an old commercial tavern, clean but humble and inexpensive, which Giles recommends. She is shocked by the difference between this tavern and the hotel in Sherton she stayed at with her husband,

Fitzpiers.

She was in a mood of the greatest depression.... The last time that she had taken any meal in a public place it had been with Fitzpiers at the dignified Earl of Wessex Hotel in that town,.... The tastes that she had acquired from Fitzpiers had been imbibed so subtly that she hardly knew she possessed them till confronted by this contrast. (38–297)

As she has experienced the elegant ways with her husband that produce a long bill which is deferred in its payment, she despises the unsophisticated ways such as Giles' paying cash at once. Grace feels her pride considerably wounded and is much distressed.

Grace intends to marry Giles because she is promised to him, but Giles is not in pursuit of Grace's love. As he holds himself back from expressing his love to her, she assumes that her marriage to him "would be unwise" (13–121). Grace does not see through her father's secret plan to avoid Giles, nor does she see into Giles' true heart. Therefore she submits tamely to fate when she reads Giles' letter which announces his abandonment of the engagement. Grace's father has a harsh viewpoint about Giles although he has originally intended to betroth his daughter, Grace, to Giles. He unpleasantly asks Grace "how could a woman, brought up delicately as you have been, bear the roughness of a life with him?" (12–117). Grace heaves a sigh of a sympathy with Giles, but her interest turns to Dr Fitzpiers.

2.3 Reappraisal

Soon after her marriage to Dr Fitzpiers, Grace assumes that her husband has a secret love affair with Mrs Charmond. She suspects that she has "made a frightful mistake in her marriage" (29–229). She realizes that she should have refused her marriage to Dr Fitzpiers. Here she has a good opportunity for thinking about what is great and little in life. She senses that

“[t]he consciousness of having to be genteel” and “the veneer of artificiality which she had acquired at the fashionable schools” (28–225) should be discarded, but that “Nature unadorned” (28–225) is important. She notices that “[h]onesty, goodness, manliness, tenderness, devotion, for her only existed in their purity now in the breasts of unvarnished men ...” (30–238).

Grace’s thought swings from urban tastes to simplicity in the country. She despised urban education and genteel life because cultivation has brought her inconvenience and troubles. She regrets that her father has sent her to those fashionable schools. She feels remorse for becoming “the wife of a professional man of [an] unusually good family” (30–240). Instead she now tolerates Giles’ homeliness, his comparative want of culture, his country dress, and his exterior roughness because she perceives that Giles is invested with “a real touch of sublimity” (30–238). This shows that Grace’s inborn nature is the rusticity of the country.

Although Grace is offended by her father’s plan to advise her to divorce Dr Fitzpiers, she fears a sudden appearance of her husband from behind some hiding place. To escape from her husband, she starts for Ivell where her friend lives and on the way she visits Giles, who offers his hut as her hiding place. Here they try to keep their friendship, but to avoid the relationship as man and woman. Giles conceals his illness, but shows his altruism while Grace is afraid of being discovered by her husband or some other villager, but refrains from asking about Giles’ physical condition. The strong anxiety restricts the heroine’s movements and thoughts. The description of the story is drawn out to a tedious length, is impeded and is unfeasible. Grace’s timid sense of morality underestimates Giles’ chivalric spirit. When she finds Giles in a wretched little shelter outside the hut, Giles is on the verge of death. She realizes his illness too late to save him.

Twice a week Grace visits Giles’ grave, saying that “[m]y heart is in the grave with Giles” (45–349), and that “I think of him as my betrothed lover still. I cannot help it” (46–355). Although she declares that she almost

worships him, she realizes that she does not love him so strongly as Marty South who has “Winterborne’s level of intelligent intercourse with Nature” (44–340). Grace convinces herself that Marty is Giles’ true complement, his counterpart, and has subjoined her thoughts to his as a corollary. Therefore Grace consoles herself by thinking that she has nothing to be bereft of because Giles would never claim her even if he had lived.

3 In connection with Dr. Fitzpiers

3.1 Interesting and imaginative

Dr Fitzpiers is a representative of “a nucleus of advanced ideas and practices” (6–80). He is an urbane person who operates “[c]hemical experiments, anatomical projects, and metaphysical conceptions. . . ” (6–80). An urbane person, Dr Fitzpiers, is put close together with a simple and rough person, Giles Winterborne. The good old Hintock ways have lost their appeal to Grace, while self-development and cultivation are the objects of Grace’s interest. Therefore Grace’s discovery of Dr Fitzpiers in the same village takes a new turn. As soon as Grace notices his existence on the same day she comes back from the city, she is much interested in him and has “the imagined pursuits of the man” and “conjectural sketches of his personality” (6–80). Grace receives a few opportunities to see him in person, and she is soon fascinated by him. She is pleased with the novelty Dr Fitzpiers has, and her father contrives his stratagems for their marriage because he has a longing toward a higher social class. Thus Grace’s mind is filled with a certain satisfaction.

Dr Fitzpiers affects her like a dream, excites her and throws her into a novel atmosphere. The receipt of his letter pleases her very much because many others would lose interest when they learn she is a timber-merchant’s daughter. The explanation of Dr Fitzpiers’ ancestors given by her father makes Grace visit the ruins of Sherton Castle and imagine those aspects of

Dr Fitzpiers.

The idea of so modern a man in science and aesthetics as the young surgeon springing out of relics so ancient was a kind of novelty she had never before experienced. The combination lent him a social and intellectual interest which she dreaded, (23–184)

3.2 Vanity and pride

One of the key points in the structure of the story is that Dr Fitzpiers visits the Melburys, has chats with Grace and her parents, and abruptly kisses Grace's lips upon his leaving. His abrupt kiss is the symbol of his curbing her action because it leads to the engagement between Grace and "the handsome, coercive, irresistible Fitzpiers" (23–186). Grace expects her husband to be "her equal, protector, and dear familiar friend" (24–189), but Dr Fitzpiers seems to be her master. She has rather "awe towards a superior being than of tender solicitude for a lover" (28–223). Grace senses that Dr Fitzpiers is not the person she looks for as her husband, but for vanity's sake and for her pride she gets married to Dr Fitzpiers.

[S]he was proud, as a cultivated woman, to be the wife of a cultivated man. It was an opportunity denied very frequently to young women in her position (24–195)

However she feels that "a curious fatefulness seemed to rule her" (24–195).

3.3 Hatred and evasion

Although Grace has life in an urban style and tours towns with her husband, she feels remorse toward her marriage because Dr Fitzpiers has love affair with Mrs Charmond. She thinks that "[a]cquiescence in her father's wishes had been degradation to herself" (29–229), and that she should have refused marriage with Dr Fitzpiers. She looks for the possibility of divorcing him and places her hope on the new divorce laws. Her father, who goes to

London also hoping for the new laws, allows Grace to be on terms of intimacy with Giles again, but the laws are not promulgated at all. Grace does not become a free woman. She regards Dr Fitzpiers as a merciless man of scientism, coldhearted and irresistible, so she wants to keep aloof from him. She fears that her husband hides himself behind some places to appear suddenly. Uneasiness leads her to bad physical shape and a kind of nervous disease and she is confined to her bedroom for many days. A letter from Dr Fitzpiers urges her to go and live in France with him, and to go to Budmouth on an appointed day. Grace is utterly taken aback, despondent, and frustrated. As she does not want to see him any more, she gets hysterical. On a rainy night she escapes her home and starts for Ivell because Dr Fitzpiers seems on his way home to Hintock and her father suggests that Grace should forgive her repenting husband. According to the state of the past affairs Grace has had with Giles, her dependence on Giles is natural for her, but Giles becomes more prudent than necessary in his relation with Grace, a doctor's wife. When Grace finds out Giles is on the verge of death, she asks her husband, whose professional skills she respects, to examine him even though such a request reveals her hiding place. Without accusing Grace, he leaves a small phial with her in order to prevent infection. She thinks her triumph is greater than she has expected. She is convinced that she is now a free woman.

3.4 Revaluation

After the death of Giles, Grace has a few chances to better her opinions of Dr Fitzpiers. The first chance is as follows. When she has feverish symptoms and takes the medicine Dr Fitzpiers has given to her, the effect of the medicine is remarkable. She recognizes his intellect and his great talents and decides to ask him about the direct cause of Giles' death because she anguishes that his death resulted from her delay in recognizing his illness.

The second chance is when Grace received the first love letter from Dr Fitzpiers soon after the effect of the medicine. He writes in the letter that only seeing Grace restores him to life, that he wishes her to consent to meet him for a short time, and that he wishes they meet and separate as acquaintances each time. Reading the letter has a certain novelty for her. She thinks that she will be able to obtain relief if she consults a skilled man, the one professional man who saw Giles at the very moment of his death. At their meeting Grace refuses Dr Fitzpiers' love, but asks what the most correct and proper course is for her. Thereafter she meets Dr Fitzpiers a few times, but her father advises that she should keep him away if she does not want to live with Dr Fitzpiers. At her father's advice she feels guilty about meeting him, but she makes a few requests of him, such as concentrating on his profession, abandoning strange studies of philosophical literature, and leading a new useful, effective life. Then Grace gradually revalues him and thinks thus:

As for him, he kept her in a mood of considerate gravity. He certainly had changed. He had at his worst times always been gentle in his manner towards her. Could it be that she might make of him a true and worthy husband yet? She had married him; there was no getting over that; and ought she any longer to keep him at a distance? His suave deference to her lightest whim on the question of his comings and goings, when as her lawful husband he might show a little insistence, was a trait in his character as unexpected as it was engaging. If she had been his empress, and he her thrall, he could not have exhibited a more sensitive care to avoid intruding upon her against her will. (47–363)

The third chance is when they become reconciled with each other. Grace is almost caught by the man-trap Tim Tangs has set, but she makes a narrow escape from the trap except for her skirt. Dr Fitzpiers holds her tightly and sheds tears in his delight and relief from the horror of his apprehension, while Grace is also thankful for his avoiding the mischievous

possibility of being caught by the trap. Both Grace and Dr Fitzpiers feel very much relieved when they find themselves safe. They go to the Earl of Wessex Hotel and make preparation for their journey to Midland where Dr Fitzpiers found a position. Finally Grace chooses Dr Fitzpiers as her dear husband from the bottom of her heart .

4 In connection with Mr Melbury

4.1 Obedience

Grace follows her father's advice in several cases, on some occasions without any doubt, and on other occasions with anxiety. The first one is that Grace becomes Giles' betrothed. Mr Melbury caused great pain to Giles' father, Mr Winterborne, by taking his lover away from him. Therefore Mr Melbury wants to compensate for his cruelty to Mr Winterborne. As Grace and Giles are good friends, Mr Melbury betrothed Grace to Giles at an early age. Then Mr Melbury decides to send his daughter to a modern school in the city in order to educate her to be a good wife for Giles. Grace seems to follow his plans without objection. Mr Melbury, however, reckons the loss and gain of his plans about Grace. He calculates the effect of his investment: Grace's education at a modern school in the city. An absurd notion takes him. He thinks that it is a great waste for him to give his daughter to such a lesser person as Giles.

The second example is as follows. As soon as Mr Melbury learns that Mrs Charmond, a lady living at Hintock House, decides not to appoint Grace as a secretary, he senses the reason is that Grace keeps company with Giles. Then he prohibits Grace to meet Giles. Mr Melbury's logic is that a woman who is brought up delicately cannot bear the roughness of a life with Giles. Grace heaves a sigh of sympathy with Giles, but she follows her father's order. She does not reply to Giles' greetings from a bough of a tree when she passes beneath the tree upon which Giles is working. She explains

like this:

“My father says it is better for us not to think too much of that – engagement, ..., between us.... I, too, think that upon the whole he is right.” (13–121)

The third case is the fulfillment of Mr Melbury’s aspiration. For him Dr Fitzpiers’ proposal to Grace means the best way to attain a higher social class. While Grace does not grasp the situation, Dr Fitzpiers kisses Grace upon his leaving from Mr Melbury’s party. Grace fears that his kiss means his engagement to her. Although Grace does not feel inclined to get married to him yet, her father tries to persuade her and says that he has already mentioned the engagement to his acquaintance, and that breaking the engagement would be a great disgrace to him. As a result Grace submits tamely to his wishes, but she feels that a curious fatefulness seems to rule her.

The fourth case takes an unexpected direction. Mr Melbury encourages his daughter divorce her husband. For that purpose he goes to London to ascertain the promulgation of the new divorce law. From London he writes to Grace that he allows her to get reconciled with Giles. The change in Mr Melbury’s attitude is attributed to the fact that Mr Melbury directly hears drunken Fitzpiers’s curse about him. As the new divorce law does not pass, they find that Grace is unable to become a free woman after all.

The last one is that Mr Melbury suggests Grace live with Dr Fitzpiers at Little Hintock because Mr Melbury understands that he is now repenting, that the partner of his folly is gone away from him to Switzerland, and that the bad chapter of his life is over.

4.2 Objection

As Mr Melbury’s advice is not consistent, as seen above, Grace, following his wishes at first, gradually becomes aware of his inconsistency. When she

discovers her husband's love affair with Mrs Charmond, she is filled with remorse about her marriage with Dr Fitzpiers for which her father wished. She thinks that her silent obedience to her father's wishes is degradation, and that she should have refused the marriage. Therefore Grace gets angry when her father tries to make them divorce.

First you induce me to accept him, and then you do things that divide us more than we should naturally be divided! (35–276)

Grace does not obey her father's advice any more. She compares Giles with Dr Fitzpiers, and perceives that Giles does not express his strong love and wishes to her, while Dr Fitzpiers has many excellent points and shows his profound love and sincerity. Therefore she decides to accept him as her suitable husband and live with him in Midland.

5 Conclusion

Grace's affliction starts when she returns home after her education in the city. As she is cultivated as a modern woman, her interest turns to urbane, rational deeds and thoughts, but her inborn, physical character corresponds with the simplicity and sublimity of the rural area. She sways between the old state of things in Little Hintock and the developing, urban atmosphere brought from outside the village. These two states are symbolized respectively by Giles Winterborne and Dr Fitzpiers. Giles is pure and reserved, and his way of life is in accordance with a traditional sense of values, while Dr Fitzpiers is sophisticated, urbane, and learned in the medical profession although he is unfaithful. He has an ability to judge things rationally. Between them Grace experiences the trials of life and learns what is crucial for her. Grace shows a friendly feeling for Giles because of his simplicity, while she feels herself drawn to Dr Fitzpiers because of his intelligence. She swings back and forth between the two

kinds of values under her father's advice and support, but her firm idea is that "I am a woman now, and can judge for myself" (11–109). This is one of the attitudes the author, Thomas Hardy, requires of women.

The death of Giles is an opportunity for Grace to get out of her lingering affection and nostalgia for Little Hintock represented by Giles Winterborne. She has been detained by her fondness for the village, but at last she follows her own decision made by her reason and her love for Dr Fitzpiers. As seen above, this story describes the process that Grace Melbury chooses Dr Fitzpiers as her husband in the way she can be convinced that it is right for her. The author seems to try to present one example of the new women who have the power to decide things by themselves without their parents' guidance.

Notes

- * I am very grateful to Mr. William Kumai, my colleague, for his helpful comments on my English, but the responsibility for all mistakes found in this essay remains my own.
- 1 In *The Return of the Native* (1878) Clym's success as an ornament merchant in Paris is an accomplished fact before the story starts. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) Henchard's effort to become Mayor are excluded from the story.
- 2 Sadao Suzuki, "Hardy and Women (4) An Immature Image of a New Woman: Eustacia" in *Journal of Nanzan Junior College* Vol. 27(December, 1999) pp. 1–14.
- 3 Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, The New Wessex Edition (Macmillan, 1974). All the passages hereafter cited are taken from this edition, and the numbers in the parentheses indicate the chapter and pages.

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